

VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: A night of homelessness

By Chris Ballard, MPP

Newmarket-Aurora

?Fear and loneliness are feelings felt nightly by homeless kids. More than a bed, they need to be cared for; they need a home.?

? Twitter feed of Michael Braithwaite, Executive Director at 360°kids

I want to tell you about an extraordinary night I spent wandering the streets of York Region, experiencing first-hand what homeless youth from our community go through every winter night.

I was participating in the second annual 360°kids Experience, where community leaders spend a bone-chilling winter night on the streets, each reenacting real life 360°kids client scenarios. Organizers wanted us to better understand what homeless youth in York Region face every night, and to raise funds for a new youth shelter.

My scenario made me a 17-year-old single mom with a baby. It is minus 22 degrees and the wind is picking up as I and my partner, Bruce Bailey, head to the only shelter in York Region that could take us in that night ? the Blue Door Shelters for families at Leeder Place on Highway 11, north of Newmarket.

360°kids is making sure that every kid matters. Headquartered in Markham, they care for young people from across York Region ? including Newmarket and Aurora. Organizers say between 300 and 500 youth do not have a home each night in York Region. With limited shelter space, many are forced to walk the streets at night trying to stay safe and warm.

Bruce, who is volunteer Chair of the Board of 360°kids, has a day job as Vice-President of a well-established company.

Bruce and I are given two VIVA bus tickets and \$3 before being turned out of the 360°kids Home Base facility on Yonge Street, just south of Elgin Mills Road at 8:30 p.m. Those bus tickets had to get us to the Blue Door Shelters and back. The \$3 was to buy a couple of coffees. We were also shadowed by two volunteers to ensure we didn't freeze to death. I'm pretty sure in real life, no-one shadowed the 17-year-old mom and her baby we were pretending to be.

360°kids provides services to over 4,000 children and youth across the region annually, helping them with their overall health and development, and lifting them out of crisis and into a place of safety and stability.

Our night raised money for the Richmond Hill Housing and Community Hub, a multi-service complex being built on Yonge Street in the heart of Richmond Hill. It's designed to support youth through their transition from homelessness to independent living, including youth from Aurora and Newmarket.

Opening in 2016, it will be the only facility of its kind in York Region, and home to the only co-ed emergency and transitional housing for youth south of Sutton and north of Toronto.

Arriving by bus at the Newmarket station, Brian and I learn there is no bus to the Leeder Place Shelter, a five kilometre walk north along Highway 11 in the dark and cold.

Thankfully, an off-duty security guard takes pity and drives us to the shelter on his way home. Would the 17-year-old mom and her baby have been so lucky? We hope so.

Safely inside the warm and bright facility, Bruce and I learn about Blue Door Shelters, serving York Region's homeless since 1982. We learn that in 2013, the shelters turned away almost 6,000 people because they lacked capacity.

We learn that in 2014, Blue Door Shelters provided more than 80,000 meals and close to 28,000 nights of safety to homeless people and families in York Region.

Leaving the shelter, we face a one hour slog south along Highway 11, in -30°C cold, to the bus stop. There are no sidewalks. Thick, uneven ice is underfoot. Lighting is minimal. Cars whiz by dangerously close.

Using our second bus ticket, we return to Richmond Hill and spend the remainder of the night moving from coffee shop to coffee shop. A couple of middle-aged white guys are not kicked out, but many young people are, and they have to keep moving. Coffee shops, all-night restaurants and bank foyers are favoured warming haunts, we learn.

At 360°kids Home Base, our starting place, we were given a sleeping bag and tarp and invited to spend the wee hours of the morning sleeping in the deep snow in the back yard until the facility opens at 6 a.m. I'm an experienced winter camper dressed for the cold, so bedding down is easy. But what would our young mom have done? How would her baby survive?

What I learned that night was how tough and resilient the youth are who face this life, without the support of family or community. I can see why some turn to alcohol and drugs to numb the pain of life on the street.

As the doors at 360°kids Home Base open and the smell of a hot breakfast wafts out, we celebrate our survival. Until we are asked

who wants to do it again that night, and the night after ? like many young people must. It is a sobering moment. York Region Police Chief Eric Jolliffe, participating for a second time and Chair of this year's event, is pleased to announce the night raised almost \$100,000 for the new shelter. A ?thank you? to all who participated, all who donated, and to the organizers. When I'm out late now, I pay special attention to the young people in the coffee shops. Do they have a place to call home? Does someone care for them? Finally, I wonder about the 17-year-old mom and her baby, whose nighttime trip in search of shelter Bruce and I reenacted. I hope they face a better future.

Our community office is located at 203-238 Wellington St. E., Aurora. Phone: 905-750-0019. Email: cballard.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org.